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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000149

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ASEC CASC KDEM AM

SUBJECT: BANNED OPPOSITION RALLY PROCEEDS WITHOUT INCIDENT

REF: A. YEREVAN 141

¶B. YEREVAN 148

Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) The opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) and Heritage Party attracted an estimated 10-15,000 people to a rally on the grounds of the Matenaderan manuscript museum March 1 to commemorate the anniversary of last year's political violence. ANC organizers then led the demonstrators in a march around the central city area and to the site of last year's protests and clashes. (Heritage Party representatives felt snubbed when ANC leader Levon Ter-Petrosian (LTP) failed to mention them during his speech, and chose not to join the march.) The rally and march proceeded calmly, with both authorities and opposition showing every restraint, despite earlier tough talk by police. The opposition was able to set up its sound equipment on the Matenaderan portico, and apparently even to connect to the museum's electrical power; we saw no generator.

¶2. (C) Although some diplomatic observers felt the rally turnout was slightly higher than the most recent opposition rallies last fall, there was a sense of deflation in the mood of the crowd. LTP's biggest applause line was when he stated that many had probably come to the rally in hopes that LTP would announce a new campaign aimed at toppling the government. When LTP went on to say that he was not planning to make any such announcement, and the party would work only for change within constitutional processes, much of the ardor seemed to go out of the assembled crowd, and large numbers began drifting away from the rally while LTP was still speaking. In his speech, LTP highlighted political prisoners, but his major theme was that Armenia faces a growing economic and social crisis, which he contended the government is mishandling. The ANC announced that its next rally would be held May 1.

¶3. (C) There was a heavy security presence throughout the city, with both riot police and heavy equipment (water cannons, armored cars) in evidence, though police kept these deployments well away from the rally site, with many assets tucked away in back alleys and courtyards to be less conspicuous. We also had a number of credible reports of police efforts to prevent protesters from the regions from getting into the capital. Emboffs directly obseved a number of police checkpoints along major highways, and there were reports of pressure on bus and taxi drivers not to take anyone to Yerevan.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is positive that the protest proceeded without incident, with both sides acting to keep things under control. Less positive is that the government still refused to grant formal permission for the demonstration, and took actions to suppress turnout. Our sense is that the opposition has, at least for now, lost momentum, and that many opposition supporters have become dispirited. However, the upcoming Yerevan municipal election (in which nearly half of Armenian voters will be eligible to cast ballots) and the

growing socio-economic crisis could provide new opportunities to galvanize anti-government zeal. The question is whether the ANC will be able to rally disgruntled Armenians under its own banner. Over the past year, popular attitudes toward LTP seem to have reverted to the disappointment and contempt that had prevailed prior to the 2008 election cycle. That being the case, conditions may be ripe for the emergence of other populist leaders or movements. End Comment.

YOVANOVITCH